

A PAMPHLET

PERTAINING TO AND EXAMINING
THE ACTIVITIES OF THE ORGANISATION

BURNE, ROPER
& SONS

OF PENRITH AND SKELTON

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INTRODUCTION

BURNE, Roper & Sons; many residing in the area of Penrith and Keswick, as well as villages surrounding the base of Helvellyn and Thirlmere, will find themselves vaguely familiar with the name of the organisation, as well as those who were alive and present in Chicksands, Bedfordshire (or surrounding villages) in 1939. It must be said, however, and it must be admitted, that few have taken sufficient interest to examine the organisation in any detail, presumably by active effort by members of the organisation itself to downplay their historical significance in these aforesaid areas. The first mention of the organisation's activities relates to the robbery of a small bank in Halifax, Yorkshire, in 1933. Curiously, the only thing left quite conspicuously on the bank teller's desk was a marked (and therefore defunct) shilling.

It has been the standard practice of the organisation thereafter to leave a similarly marked shilling on the desk of the bank-teller, and each robbery takes place in a relatively small-scale bank with low security and poor organisation of filing. This is presumed to be a deliberate effort on the part of BR&S in order to reduce their historical impact and therefore reduce the likelihood of the authorities considering carrying out a significant operation to neutralise them, being as the benefit to the economies of affected counties would be outweighed by the cost of the operation.

52 such robberies occurred in the years between 1933 and 1936. It was at this point that an operation was considered justified. Approximately 14,500 pounds had been stolen from banks in Yorkshire, northern Lancashire and Bedfordshire by February 1937. A covert investigation was carried out to attempt to determine who was behind the robberies, and it was quickly found that within two days of each bank robbery occurring, there were reports of an extremely low-flying agricultural aircraft, described as a 'red bi-plane,' over a village near to the bank, or the town in which the bank stood. Often this was accompanied by a 'falling object' which often appeared to land in somebody's garden.

Only in 1938 were these incidents triangulated back to central or eastern Cumberland, the northernmost English county, and were presumed (because of the sheer unlikelihood that such an organisation could be run from a small, quaint village) that they were operating from Carlisle. However, discoveries of a calling card marked 'Burne, Roper & Sons' in the letterboxes of the abandoned houses that appeared to be receiving deliveries provided a substantial aid to the investigation.

The most likely suspects - which was determined by analysis of parish records - were members of the Roper family of Sebergham and the Burne family of Skelton. The most likely candidates, deemed to be Arthur Roper (aged 39 when the investigation began) and Michael Burn (aged 41). However, brief covert observation showed that these two individuals were not affiliated with each other and had likely never even met one another, the former being a farmer, the latter being a gamekeeper.

The search maintained its focus of Skelton village and found one Roper to be living there; Simon Roper, the 23-year-old adoptive son of a labourer. He was found to be close friends with 21-year-old Jack Burne, son of the aforesaid Michael. Both would have been in their teenage years when the robberies started, so it was deemed not likely enough to warrant an arrest or a conviction. Further investigation was not carried out by the authorities.

I consider this to be a great failure by the authorities to recognise the importance of this case, as well as what I suspect was a fear of the Cumberland police force. As such, over the past four years I have conducted a study of Burne, Roper & Sons, and have come to some unfortunately sparse conclusions that are outlined at the end of this pamphlet. Notwithstanding this, the following information pertains to the individuals known to be associated with Burne, Roper & Sons, as well as their activities.

1) Jack Daniel Burne, born 4th December 1915 in Skelton, Cumberland, is almost certainly the eponymous 'Burne,' as his spelling of the name is vanishingly rare in the county, the preferred one being 'Burn' without the 'e.' He was a regular user of the Westmoreland grouse moors in the 1920s and 30s, frequenting them at first with his father and then alone. He hunted predominantly red grouse (*Lagopus lagopus scotica*), a more colourful and ornate species than their cousins the black-cock (*Tetrao tetrix*) or the white ptarmigan (*Lagopus muta*). He is described in many accounts as being a good marksman when dealing with moving targets using a 28-gauge shotgun. He was a fair-haired individual with crooked and broken teeth and a 'thin, fashionable moustache,' by most accounts, and was known to play eight-ball pool to a high standard, often being referred to by his friends as 'the hustler.' He spoke with a thin regional accent and in sparse dialect. He was not known to be a violent man until his conviction for a substantial attack on the police force of Bedfordshire in 1939, for which he was arrested and imprisoned in Dartmoor penitentiary. He never spoke of home to any of the guards. He escaped in 1944 and was not heard from again. He was presumed to have died in the Dartmoor wilderness aged 29. I suspect that he did not, due to his inclusion in the parish records of 1951 as the best man at the wedding of Roper to a woman they were associated with, but I cannot speculate on how he might have evaded capture.

2) Simon James Roper, born 29th June 1914 in Sebergham, Cumberland, and the suspected offspring of Arthur Roper (then aged 16) and an unknown mother. He was raised by another family in Skelton, where he is believed to have been close friends with Burne since his (Burne's) birth. He often helped Daniel Sykes (later described) with fell-farming work but was said to be poor at it. He played the piano alongside Sykes, in 1951 releasing a series of popular folk songs, and was said to be in a relationship with his second cousin, Virginia Atkinson, since the late 1920s. He married her at a registry office in 1951 or 1952 - the records have been obscured. They divorced in 1953, and after that point Roper disappeared from the records at the age of 39. He owned a house on Chapelfield rd., Skelton from 1934 onwards (which I suspect was purchased with the aid of stolen money). Burne lived there from 1935 onwards. The house was sold in 1953 when Roper vanished. He owned several crooks and, alongside Burne and a group of others, occasionally hunted hares (*Lepus europaeus*). Accounts claim they brought back carcasses of pikas - small lagomorph relatives of the hare - which were thought to have gone extinct some five thousand years ago in Cumberland, but locals assert that small populations remained until at least 1920.

3) Daniel 'Danny' Reginald Sykes, born 3rd August 1910, was a friend of Burne and Roper and an affiliate of the organisation, I suspect, who lives at the base of Helvellyn to this day at the age of 47, at the time of writing. He is one in a long line of fell-farmers who own an ancient flock of Herdwick sheep. He is a proficient piano player and a passable singer, and has released several songs, most of them in 1951. I was fortunate enough to meet him three years ago. He is a standard gentleman of Cumberland, scarcely smiling but always docile and approachable. When I met him, he chewed a blade of grass throughout our brief conversation and spoke in heavy dialect. He appeared to have a revolver holstered in his belt but did not make a big point of it. We only spoke casually of the fells, and I regret I did not ask him about the disappearance of his friends.

4) Virginia 'Ginnie' Charlotte Atkinson, born early January 1912 (her precise date of birth was not recorded), was a friend of the company and was in a relationship with Roper from the late 1920s to their divorce in 1953. She lived with them and was known to frequently hunt with them. After the divorce, she moved to nearby Allerdale (popularly known by tourists as the Lake District) and remarried. I have been unable to contact her.

5) Áshildr 'Hilde' Selsdottir Akerman, born presumably c.1910, was in a relationship with Daniel Sykes and is presumed to have known at least a small amount about the operations of BR&S, given her being sighted on a few occasions with either Burne, Roper, Atkinson or all three. She is still alive and lives near Sykes.

6) Sheila Rose Punter, born 7th Feb 1915, may or may not have been in a relationship with Burne at some point - this is spurious. At any rate, she was certainly associated with the company in a way that was not via genetic relation to any of its members, and she was seen to spend a lot of time hunting with them, suggesting considerable knowledge of their movements.

7) Joseph Roscorla, 31st October 1865 - 9th August 1934 (bur. aged 68) was a friend of Atkinson's father and something of an uncle to her and a friend to Roper. He was also associated with the company from whom BR&S are thought to have obtained their crop duster.

Sykes, Akerman, Atkinson and Punter could in theory still be contacted with the aim of finding the whereabouts of Roper and/or Burne.



FIG 1: Jack Burne as painted by Ginnie Atkinson in 1937 at the age of 21.



FIG 2: Simon Roper as painted by Ginnie Atkinson in 1937 at the age of 22, making a profane gesture.



FIG 3: Danny Sykes as painted by Ginnie Atkinson in 1937, aged approx. 27.



FIG 4: Ginnie Atkinson, photographed in 1938 at the age of 26.